

NONE SO BLIND¹

By MARY SYNON

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WE were listening to Leila Burton's music — her husband, and Dick Allport, and I — with the throb of London beating under us like the surge of an ocean in anger, when there rose above the smooth harmonies of the piano and the pulsing roar of the night a sound more poignant than them both, the quavering melody of a street girl's song.

Through the purpling twilight of that St. John's Eve I had been drifting in dreams while Leila had gone from golden splendors of chords which reflected the glow on westward-fronting windows into somber symphonies which had seemed to make vocal the turbulent soul of the city — for Dick Allport and I were topping the structure of that house of life that was to shelter the love we had long been cherishing. With Leila playing in that art which had dowered her with fame, I was visioning the glory of such love as she and Standish Burton gave each other while I watched Dick, sensing rather than seeing the dearness of him as he gave to the mounting climaxes the tense interest he always tendered to Leila's music.

I had known, before I came to love Dick Allport, other loves and other lovers. Because I had followed will-o'-the-wisps of fancy through marshes of sentiment I could appreciate the more the truth of that flame which he and

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I had lighted for our guidance on the road. A moody boy he had been when I first met him, full of a boy's high chivalry and of a boy's dark despairs. A moody man he had become in the years that had denied him the material success toward which he had striven; but something in the patience of his efforts, something in the fineness of his struggle had endeared him to me as no triumph could have done. Because he needed me, because I had come to believe that I meant to him belief in the ultimate good of living, as well as belief in womanhood, I cherished in my soul that love of him which yearned over him even as it longed for him.

Watching him in the dusk while he lounged in that concentrated quiet of attention, I went on piling the bricks of that wide house of happiness we should enter together; and, although I could see him but dimly, so well did I know every line of his face that I could fancy the little smile that quivered around his lips and that shone from the depths of his eyes as Leila played the measures we both loved. I must have been smiling in answer when the song of the girl outside rose high.

Not until that alien sound struck athwart the power and beauty of the spell did I come to know how high I had builded my castles; but the knocking at the gate toppled down the dreams as Leila swept a discord over the keyboard and crossed to the open window.

In the dusk, as she flung back the heavy curtains, I could see the bulk of Brompton Oratory set behind the houses like the looming back-drop of a painted scene. Nearer, in front of a tall house across the way, stood the singer, a thin girl whose shadowy presence seemed animated by a curious bravery. In a nasal, plaintive voice she was singing the words of a ballad of love and of loving that London, as only London can, had made curiously its own that season. The insistence of her plea — for she sang as if she cried out her life's longing, sang as if she called on the passing crowd not for alms, but for understanding — made her for the moment, before she

faded back into oblivion, an artist, voicing the heartache and the heartbreak of womankind; and the artist in Leila Burton responded to the thrill.

Until the ending of the song she stood silent in front of the window, unconscious of the fact that she, and not the scene beyond her, held the center of the stage. Not for her beauty, although at times Leila Burton gave the impression of being exquisitely lovely, was she remarkable, but rather for that receptive attitude that made her an inspired listener. In me, who had known her for but a little while, she awakened my deepest and drowsiest ambition, the desire to express in pictures the light and the shade of the London I knew. With her I could feel the power, and the glory, and the fear, and the terror of the city as I never did at other times. It was not alone that she was all things to all men; it was that she led men and women who knew her to the summits of their aspirations.

Even Standish Burton, big, sullen man that he was, immersed in his engineering problems, responded to his wife's spiritual charm with a readiness that always aroused in Dick and myself an admiration for him that our other knowledge of him did not justify. He was, aside from his relationship to Leila, a man whose hardness suggested a bitter knowledge of dark ways of life. Now, crouched down in the depths of his chair, he kept watching Leila with a gaze of smouldering adoration, revealing that love for her which had been strong enough to break down those barriers which she had erected in the years while he had worked for her in Jacob's bondage. In her he seemed to be discovering, all over again, the vestal to tend the fires of his faith.

Dick Allport, too, bending forward over the table on which his hands fell clenched, was studying Leila with an inscrutable stare that seemed to be of query. I was wondering what it meant, wondering the more because my failure to understand its meaning hung another veil between my vision and my shrine of belief in the fullness

of love, when the song outside came to an end and Leila turned back to us.

Her look, winging its way to Standish, lighted her face even beyond the glow from the lamps which she switched on. For an instant his heavy countenance flared into brightness. Dick Allport sighed almost imperceptibly as he turned to me. I had a feeling that such a fire as the Burtons kindled for each other should have sprung up in the moment between Dick and me, for we had fought and labored and struggled for our love as Standish and Leila had never needed to battle. Because of our constancy I expected something better than the serene affectionateness that shone in Dick's smile. I wanted such stormy passion of devotion as Burton gave to Leila, such love as I, remembering a night of years ago, knew that Dick could give. It was the old desire of earth, spoken in the street girl's song, that surged in me until I could have cried out in my longing for the soul of the sacrament whose substance I had been given; but the knowledge that we were, the four of us, conventional people in a conventional setting locked my heart as it locked my lips until I could mirror the ease with which Leila bore herself.

"I have been thinking," she said, lightly, "that I should like to be a street singer for a night. If only a piano were not so cumbersome, I should go out and play into the ears of the city the thing that girl put into her song."

"Why not?" I asked her. "It would be an adventure, and life has too few adventures."

"It might have too many," Dick said.

"Not for Leila," Standish declared. "Life's for her a quest of joy."

"That's it," Dick interposed. "Her adventures have all been joyous."

"But they haven't," Leila insisted. "I'm no spoiled darling of the gods. I've been poor, poor as that girl out there. I've had heartaches, and disappointments, and misfortunes."

"Not vital ones," Dick declared. "You've never had a knock-out blow."

"She doesn't know what one is," Standish laughed, but there sounded a ruefulness in his laughter that told of the kind of blow he must once have suffered to bring that note in his voice. Standish Burton took life lightly, except where Leila was concerned. His manner now indicated, almost mysteriously, that something threatened his harbor of peace, but the regard Leila gave to him proved that the threat of impending danger had not come to her.

"Oh, but I do know," she persisted.

"Vicariously," I suggested. "All artists do."

"No, actually," she said.

"You're wrong," said Standish. "You're the sort of woman whom the world saves from its own cruelties."

There was something so essentially true in his appraisal of his wife that the certainty covered the banality of his statement and kept Dick and myself in agreement with him. Leila Burton, exquisitely remote from all things commonplace, was unquestionably a woman to be protected. Without envy — since my own way had its compensations in full measure — I admitted it.

"I think that you must have forgotten, if you ever knew," she said, "how I struggled here in London for the little recognition I have won."

"Oh, that!" Dick Allport deprecated. "That isn't what Stan means. Every one in the world worth talking about goes through that sort of struggle. He means the flinging down from a high mountain after you've seen the glories, not of this world, but of another, the casting out from paradise after you've learned what paradise may mean. He spoke with an odd timbre of emotion in his voice, a quality that puzzled me for the moment.

"That's it," said Standish, gratefully. "Those are the knock-out blows."

"Well, then, I don't know them" — Leila admitted her defeat — "and I hope that I shall not."

Softly she began to play the music of an accompani-

ment. There was a familiar hauntingness in its strains that puzzled me until I associated them with the song that Burton used to whistle so often in the times when Leila was in Paris and he had turned for companionship to Dick and to me.

"I've heard Stan murder that often enough to be able to try it myself," I told her.

"I didn't know he knew it," she said. "I heard it for the first time the other day. A girl—I didn't hear her name—sang it for an encore at the concert of the Musicians' Club. She sang it well, too. She was a queer girl," Leila laughed, "a little bit of a thing, with all the air of a tragedy queen. And you should have heard how she sang that! You know the words?"—she asked me over her shoulder:

"And because I, too, am a lover,
And my love is far from me,
I hated the two on the sands there,
And the moon, and the sands, and the sea."

"And the moon, and the sands, and the sea," Dick repeated. He rose, going to the window where Leila had stood, and looking outward. When he faced us again he must have seen the worry in my eyes, for he smiled at me with the old, endearing fondness and touched my hair lightly as he passed.

"What was she like—the girl?" Standish asked, lighting another cigarette.

"Oh, just ordinary and rather pretty. Big brown eyes that seemed to be forever asking a question that no one could answer, and a little pointed chin that she flung up when she sang." Dick Allport looked quickly across at Burton, but Stan gave him no answering glance. He was staring at Leila as she went on: "I don't believe I should have noticed her at all if she hadn't come to me as I was leaving the hall. 'Are you Mrs. Standish Burton?' she asked me. When I told her that I was, she stared me full in the face, then walked off without an-

other word. I wish that I could describe to you, though, the scorn and contempt that blazed in her eyes. If I had been a singer who had robbed her of her chance at Covent Garden, I could have understood. - But I'd never seen her before, and my singing wouldn't rouse the envy of a crow!" She laughed light-heartedly over the recollection, then her face clouded. "Do you know," she mused, "that I thought just now, when the girl was singing on the street, that I should like to know that other girl? There was something about her that I can't forget. She was the sort that tries, and fails, and sinks. Some day, I'm afraid, she'll be singing on the streets, and, if I ever hear her, I shall have a terrible thought that I might have saved her from it, if only I had tried!"

"Better let her sort alone," Burton said, shortly. He struck a match and relit his cigarette with a gesture of savage annoyance. Leila looked at him in amazement, and Dick gave him a glance that seemed to counsel silence. There was a hostility about the mood into which Standish relapsed that seemed to bring in upon us some of the urgent sorrows of the city outside, as if he had drawn aside a curtain to show us a world alien to the place of beauty and of the making of beauty through which Leila moved. Even she must have felt the import of his mood, for she let her hands fall on the keys while Dick and I stared at each other before the shock of this crackle that seemed to threaten the perfection of their happiness.

From Brompton came the boom of the bell for even-song. Down Piccadilly ran the roar of the night traffic, wending a blithesome way to places of pleasure. It was the hour when London was wont to awaken to the thrill of its greatness, its power, its vastness, its strength, and its glory, and to send down luminous lanes its carnival crowd of men and women. It was the time when weltering misery shrank shrouded into merciful gloom; when the East End lay far from our hearts; when poverty and sin and shame went skulking into byways where we need never follow; when painted women held back in the

shadows; when the pall of night rested like a velvet carpet over the spaces of that floor that, by daylight, gave glimpses into loathsome cellars of humanity. It was, as it had been so often of late, an hour of serene beauty, that first hour of darkness in a June night with the season coming to an end, an hour of dusk to be remembered in exile or in age.

There should have come to us then the strains of an orchestra floating in with the fragrance of gardenias from a vendor's basket, symbols of life's call to us, luring us out beneath stars of joy. But, instead, the bell of Brompton pealed out warningly over our souls, and, when its clanging died, there drifted in the sound of a preaching voice.

Only phrases clattering across the darkness were the words from beyond — resonant through the open windows: "The Cross is always ready, and everywhere awaiteth thee. . . . Turn thyself upward, or turn thyself downward; turn thyself inward, or turn thyself outward; everywhere thou shalt find the Cross; . . . if thou fling away one Cross thou wilt find another, and perhaps a heavier."

Like sibylline prophecy the voice of the unseen preacher struck down on us. We moved uneasily, the four of us, as he cried out challenge to the passing world before his voice went down before the surge of a hymn. Then, just as the gay whirl of cars and omnibuses beat once more upon the pavements, and London swung joyously into our hearts again, the bell of the telephone in the hall rang out with a quivering jangle that brought Leila to her feet even as Standish jumped to answer its summons.

She stood beside the piano as he gave answer to the call, watching him as if she expected evil news. Dick, who had moved back into the shadow from a lamp on the table, was staring with that same searching gaze he had bestowed on her when she had lingered beside the window. I was looking at him, when a queer cry from Standish whirled me around.

In the dim light of the hall he was standing with the

instrument in his hands, clutching it with the stupidity of a man who has been struck by an unexpected and unexplainable missile. His face had gone to a grayish white, and his hands trembled as he set the receiver on the hook. His eyes were bulging from emotion and he kept wetting his lips as he stood in the doorway.

"What is it?" Leila cried. "What's happened, Stan? Can't you tell me? What is it?"

Not to her, but to Dick Allport, he made answer. "Bessie Lowe is dead!"

I saw Dick Allport's thunderstruck surprise before he arose. I saw his glance go from Standish to Leila with a questioning that overrode all other possible emotion in him. Then I saw him look at Burton as if he doubted his sanity. His voice, level as ever, rang sharply across the other man's distraction.

"When did she die?" he asked him.

"Just now." He ran his hand over his hair, gazing at Dick as if Leila and I were not there. "She — she killed herself down in the Hotel Meynard."

"Why?" Leila's voice, hard with terror, snapped off the word.

"She — she — I don't know." He stared at his wife as if he had just become conscious of her presence. The grayness in his face deepened, and his lips grew livid. Like a man condemned to death, he stared at the world he was losing.

"Who is Bessie Lowe?" Leila questioned. "And why have they called you to tell of her?" Her eyes blazed with a fire that seemed about to singe pretense from his soul.

His hand went to his throat, and I saw Leila whiten. Her hand, resting on the piano, trembled, but her face held immobile, although I knew that all the happiness of the rest of her life hung upon his answer. On what Standish Burton would tell her depended the years to come. In that moment I knew that she loved him even as I loved Dick, even as women have always loved and

will always love the men whom fate had marked for their caring; and in a sudden flash of vision I knew, too, that Burton, no matter what Bessie Lowe or any other girl had ever been to him, worshiped his wife with an intensity of devotion that would make all his days one long reparation for whatever wrong he might have done her. I knew, though, that, if he had done the wrong, she would never again be able to give him the eager love he desired, and I, too, an unwilling spectator, waited on his words for his future, and Leila's; but his voice did not make answer. It was Dick Allport who spoke.

"Bessie Lowe is a girl I used to care for," he said. "She is the girl who sang at the Musicians' Club, the girl who spoke to you. She heard that I was going to be married. She wanted me to come back to her. I refused."

He was standing in the shadow, looking neither at Leila nor at me, but at Standish Burton. Burton turned to him.

"Yes," he muttered thickly, "they told me to tell you. They knew you'd be here."

"I see," said Leila. She looked at Standish and then at Dick Allport, and there came into her eyes a queer, glazed stare that filmed their brightness. "I am sorry that I asked questions, Mr. Allport, about something that was nothing to me. Will you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to be forgiven," he said. He turned to her and smiled a little. She tried to answer his smile, but a gasp came from her instead.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, "so sorry for her!"

It was Standish's gaze that brought to me sudden realization that I, too, had a part in the drama. Until I found his steady stare on me I had felt apart from the play that he and Dick and Leila were going through, but with his urgent glare I awoke into knowledge that the message he had taken for Dick held for me the same significance that Leila had thought it bore for her. Like a stab from a knife came the thought that this girl—

whoever she was — had, in her dying, done what she had not done in life, taken Dick Allport from me. There went over me numbing waves of a great sense of loss, bearing me out on an ocean of oblivion. Against these I fought desperately to hold myself somewhere near the shore of sensibility. As if I were beholding him from a great distance, I could see Dick standing in the lamplight in front of Leila Burton. Understanding of how dear he was to me, of how vitally part of me he had grown in the years through which I had loved him — sometimes lightly, sometimes stormily, but always faithfully — beacons me inshore; and the plank of faith in him, faith that held in itself something of forgiving charity, floated out to succor my drowning soul. I moved across the room while Standish Burton kept his unwinking gaze upon me, and Leila never looked up from the piano. I had come beside Dick before he heard me.

He looked at me as if he had only just then remembered that I was there. Into his eyes flashed a look of poignant remorse. He shrank back from me a little as I touched his hand, and I turned to Leila, who had not stirred from the place where she had listened to Standish's cry when he took the fateful message. "We are going," I said, "to do what we can — for her."

She moved then to look at me, and I saw that her eyes held not the compassion I had feared, but a strange speculativeness, as if she questioned what I knew rather than what I felt. Their contemplating quiet somehow disturbed me more than had her husband's flashlight scrutiny, and with eyes suddenly blinded and throat drawn tight with terror I took my way beside Dick Allport out from the soft lights of the Burtons' house into the darkness of the night.

Outside we paused a moment, waiting for a cab. For the first time since he had told Leila of Bessie Lowe, Dick spoke to me. "I think," he said, "that it would be just as well if you didn't come."

"I must," I told him. "It isn't curiosity. You un-

derstand that, don't you? It is simply that this is the time for me to stand by you, if ever I shall do it, Dick."

"I don't deserve it." There was a break in his voice. "But I shall try to, my dear. I can't promise you much, but I can promise you that."

Down the brightness of Piccadilly into the fuller glow of Regent Street we rode without speech. Somewhere below the Circus we turned aside and went through dim cañons of houses that opened a way past the Museum and let us into Bloomsbury. There in a wilderness of cheap hotels and lodging-houses we found the Meynard.

A gas lamp was flaring in the hall when the porter admitted us. At a desk set under the stairway a pale-faced clerk awaited us with staring insolence that shifted to annoyance when Dick asked him if we might go to Bessie Lowe's room. "No," he said, abruptly. "The officers won't let any one in there. They've taken her to the undertaker's."

He gave us the location of the place with a scorn that sent us out in haste. I, at least, felt a sense of relief that I did not have to go up to the place where this unknown girl had thrown away the greatest gift. As we walked through the poorly lighted streets toward the Tottenham Court Road I felt for the first time a surge of that emotion that Leila Burton had voiced, a pity for the dead girl. And yet, stealing a look at Dick as he walked onward quietly, sadly, but with a dignity that lifted him above the sordidness of the circumstances, I felt that I could not blame him as I should. It was London, I thought, and life that had tightened the rope on the girl.

Strangely I felt a lightness of relief in the realization that the catastrophe having come, was not really as terrible as it had seemed back there in Leila's room. It was an old story that many women had conned, and since, after all, Dick Allport was yet young, and my own, I condoned the sin for the sake of the sinner; and yet, even as I held the thought close to my aching heart, I felt that I was somehow letting slip from my shoulders the

cross that had been laid upon them, the cross that I should have borne, the burden of shame and sorrow for the wrong that the man I loved had done to the girl who had died for love of him.

The place where she lay, a gruesome establishment set in behind that highway of reeking cheapness, the Tottenham Court Road, was very quiet when we entered. A black-garbed man came to meet us from a room in which we saw two tall candles burning. Dick spoke to him sharply, asking if any one had come to look after the dead girl.

"No one with authority," the man whined — "just a girl as lived with her off and on."

He stood, rubbing his hands together as Dick went into hurried details with him, and I went past them into the room where the candles burned. For an instant, as I stood at the door, I had the desire to run away from it all, but I pulled myself together and went over to the place where lay the girl they had called Bessie Lowe.

I had drawn back the sheet and was standing looking down at the white face when I heard a sob in the room. I replaced the covering and turned to see in the corner the shadowy form of a woman whose eyes blazed at me out of the dark. While I hesitated, wondering if this were the girl who had lived occasionally with Bessie Lowe, she came closer, staring at me with scornful hate. Miserably thin, wretchedly nervous as she was, she had donned for the nonce a mantle of dignity that she seemed to be trailing as she approached, glaring at me with furious resentment. "So you thought as how you'd come here," she demanded of me, her crimsoned face close to my own, "to see what she was like, to see what sort of a girl had him before you took him away from her? Well, I'll tell you something, and you can forget it or remember it, as you like. Bessie Lowe was a good girl until she ran into him, and she'd have stayed good, I tell you, if he'd let her alone. She was a fool, though, and she thought that he'd marry her some day — and all the

time he was only waiting until you'd take him! You never think of our kind, do you, when you're living out your lives, wondering if you care enough to marry the men who're worshipping you while they're playing with us? Well, perhaps it won't be anything to you, but, all the same, there's some kind of a God, and if He's just He'll punish you when He punishes Standish Burton!"

"But I —" I gasped. "Did you think that I —?"

"Aren't you his wife?" She came near to me, peering at me in the flickering candle-light. "Aren't you Standish Burton's wife?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, well" — she shrugged — "you're her sort, and it'll come to the same thing in the end."

She slouched back to the corner, all anger gone from her. Outside I heard Dick's voice, low, decisive. Swiftly I followed the girl. "You must tell me," I pleaded with her, "if she did it because of Standish Burton."

"I thought everybody knew that," she said, "even his wife. What's it to you, if you're not that?"

"Nothing," I replied, but I knew, as I stood where she kept vigil with Bessie Lowe, that I lied. For I saw the truth in a lightning-flash; and I knew, as I had not known when Dick perjured himself in Leila's music-room, that I had come to the place of ultimate understanding, for I realized that not a dead girl, but a living woman, had come between us. Not Bessie Lowe, but Leila Burton, lifted the sword at the gateway of my paradise.

With the poignancy of a poisoned arrow reality came to me. Because Dick had loved Leila Burton he had laid his bond with me on the altar of his chivalry. For her sake he had sacrificed me to the hurt to which Standish would not sacrifice her. And the joke of it — the pity of it was that she hadn't believed them! But because she was Burton's wife, because it was too late for facing of the truth, she had pretended to believe Dick; and she had known, she must have known, that he had lied to her because he loved her.

The humiliation of that knowledge beat down on me, battering me with such blows as I had not felt in my belief that Dick had not been true to me in his affair with this poor girl. Her rivalry, living or dead, I could have endured and overcome — for no Bessie Lowe could ever have won from Dick, as she could never have given to him, that thing which was mine. But against Leila Burton I could not stand, for she was of my world, of my own people, and the crown a man would give to her was the one he must take from me.

There in that shabby place I buried my idols. Not I, but a power beyond me, held the stone on which was written commandment for me. By the light of the candles above Bessie Lowe I knew that I should not marry Dick Allport.

I found him waiting for me at the doorway. I think that he knew then that the light of our guiding lantern had flickered out, but he said nothing. We crossed the garishly bright road and went in silence through quiet streets. Like children afraid of the dark we went through the strange ways of the city, two lonely stragglers from the procession of love, who, with our own dreams ended, saw clearer the world's wild pursuit of the fleeing vision.

We had wandered back into our own land when, in front of the darkened Oratory and almost under the shadow of Leila Burton's home, there came to us through the soft darkness the ominous plea that heralds summer into town. Out of the shadows an old woman, bent and shriveled, leaned toward us. "Get yer lavender to-night," she pleaded. "'Tis the first of the crop, m'lidy."

"That means —" Dick Allport began as I paused to buy.

I fastened the sprigs at my belt, then looked up at the distant stars, since I could not yet bear to look at him. "It means the end of the season," I said, "when the lavender comes to London."